

Testimony of Olivia A. Golden
Nominee for Appointment as Director of C.F.S.A.
September 17, 2001

Good morning Chairperson Allen, members of the Committee on Human Services, [and distinguished guests]. I am Olivia Golden, Acting Director of the Child and Family Services Agency. I am honored and privileged to come before you today to testify on behalf of my nomination. It is a special honor to be nominated as the Director of CFSA, which has only been in existence as a District agency since the Federal Court receivership ended on June 15.

I want to first express my appreciation to Mayor Williams for his leadership in ending the agency's court-ordered receivership, and for inviting me to join his team. I also want to thank Chairperson Sandy Allen, the members of the Committee on Human Services, and all the members of the City Council for your support in acting expeditiously to pass the legislation establishing CFSA as an independent agency, and for approving a major budget increase to build the foundation for Agency reform. As you know, in FY01 CFSA received a major increase in funding to enable it to make progress in addressing the requirements of the court order and meeting the needs of children and families. I want to thank you for that important commitment.

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I also want to thank you for your warmth to me on the occasions I have sought advice or help during the short time I have been here. Chairperson Allen in particular has been generous with her time and her support when we have needed advice, action, or even additional legislation to support us in the complex task of creating a new District agency from a court-appointed receivership.

I am joined today by several members of my Management Team whom I would like to introduce to you. The consent decree that ended the Receivership required me to recruit a Management Team, and I am delighted to report that I have been able to bring together topflight managers from inside and outside the agency. I would like to introduce to you today:

Before I tell you more about myself and my hopes and plans for the agency, I want to take a moment to talk about a more somber topic: the tragic stories in last week's Washington Post series on child fatalities in the District of Columbia. That some of the deaths may have been preventable – through early intervention, increased supports to fragile families, lower caseloads and better training for social workers – is very, very distressing. But I truly

believe that we can and will achieve better outcomes for children – and that is why I am here. I am confident that, with your continued support, the Child and Family Services Agency will be able to make a positive difference in the lives of children and, in particular, that it will live up to the basic commitments of a child welfare agency: to keep children safe; to enable them to grow up in permanent, loving families; and to promote the well-being of our most vulnerable children and most fragile families.

MY BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE

I bring to this position more than twenty years of work on issues of children and families at different levels of government and in nonprofit and academic settings, including experience in two Presidentially appointed positions at the U.S Department of Health and Human Services; as the Director for Programs and Policies at the Children's Defense Fund; as the Budget Director for Human Services in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; and as a faculty member at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

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Directly prior to coming to District Government, I served under Secretary Donna Shalala at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, first as Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families and then as the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families. During my tenure at HHS, I worked with state and local partners to increase adoptions, increase child care opportunities for low income families, improve child support collections, and enable more than one million welfare parents to move into employment. I am especially proud of my role in creating and implementing Early Head Start, which extends the benefits of Head Start to infants and toddlers. And I have recently been delighted to learn that a set of initiatives designed under my leadership to improve the quality of child welfare services in the states – including child protection, foster care, and adoption – has been designated a Finalist in the Ford Foundation/ Kennedy School of Government national competition for Innovations in Government.

Before joining the Clinton administration, I served as Director of Programs and Policy for the Children's Defense Fund. In addition to a wide variety of national policy responsibilities, I also led several local projects, including a collaboration with community foundations in cities and towns across the

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country as well as CDF's District of Columbia project. And before that, as a faculty member at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, I had the opportunity to conduct research and to teach in the areas of public management and child and family policy.

Throughout my career, as a leader, a public manager, a teacher, and a researcher, I have always cared deeply about the results that our programs and policies actually deliver for children and families. For me, it has never been enough that policy ideas are appealing; the test is how they work in practice to benefit children and families. And in the field of child and family services, delivering results means ensuring that the committed professionals who work directly with children and families – whether teachers, social workers, nurses, or child care staff – experience both the supports and the high expectations and accountability that will help them do their best work. To me, creating an environment that supports social workers in doing their very best - and that expects the very best - is one of the key tasks ahead for CFSA.

VISION FOR CFSA

To tell you a little more about my vision for the agency, I want to tell you first about a family I visited just after I came to CFSA. During my early months at the agency, I have taken a hands-on approach to gaining experience with all of the aspects of CFSA's work – including spending an evening shift with the intake staff, visiting the Healthy Families/ Thriving Communities neighborhood collaboratives, meeting families and staff at the Community Day picnic at CFSA's Ferebee Hope location in Ward 8, attending court hearings, joining foster parents in a variety of settings to hear about their experiences, and hearing from teen mothers who are in the care of CFSA.

Of all these experiences, one of the most moving was a home visit to a family who had been served by CFSA's Families Together program, which provides intensive in-home services to carefully screened families. The mother I visited had been reunited with two of her children, who had spent time in foster care while she was undergoing substance abuse treatment a number of years ago. The social worker had been intensively involved with the family to help them address the tension and fighting that they all

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experienced after the girls returned home, and she was credited by the mother with helping them find ways to solve their conflicts without fighting, with improving the girls' behavior, with teaching her to be a better parent, and with helping them become a real family. And perhaps most moving of all, before we left the home, the girls proudly took out their report cards to show the social worker, and their mother explained that the worker had helped them get excited and involved in school.

For me, this visit captured the key elements of the vision for the Child and Family Services Agency: through her work, this social worker had ensured the children's safety, enabled them to return home to a permanent family, and promoted their well-being, including in this case their educational success. Throughout CFSA – whether in intake, in adoptions, or in foster care – our job is to live up to those goals of ensuring safety, enabling children to grow up in a permanent family, and promoting wellbeing for vulnerable children and families.

I believe that we have a historic **moment of opportunity** in the District to accomplish this vision, because of the commitments that the Mayor and the City Council have made to the agency and to the District's children as part of the process of ending the Federal Court Receivership. Among the key commitments that give CFSA, working with your support and the support of other key partners, the true capacity to make a difference:

Budget and resources. Because of your commitment, CFSA's budget increased by more than \$30 million from FY2000 to FY2001. This increase was part of the consent order that ended the receivership and is directly related to good outcomes for children: the added resources are intended, among other purposes, to make it possible to hire sufficient social workers, expand critical services such as substance abuse, and provide foster parents a much-needed rate increase so that more people can provide a safe home for a child in need.

Unified functions. In April, legislation passed by the Council to create CFSA as a unified, cabinet-level District agency became effective. This legislation brought together a range of functions that had been fragmented across the government, frustrating accountability and effective service

delivery, and provided the new CFSA with the critical powers that we need to make a difference. Specifically, the April legislation gave the agency the authority to license and monitor facilities and responsibility for the interstate placement of children. It also required the unification of the child abuse and neglect systems, ending a fractured service delivery system, unique to the District among all jurisdictions nationwide, which had separated abuse cases (handled by the police department and Court Social Services) from neglect cases (handled by CFSA). A series of reports have documented the complexity of this system and the obstacles it has placed in the way of serving families effectively, so I am especially appreciative of the hard work all parties have done this summer to implement the new law under great time pressure, in order to take full advantage of the opportunity to serve families better.

Unified government. Now that we have joined District government as a cabinet-level agency, CFSA is connected to a whole range of partners who are critical to putting together integrated services for children and families. We have a real opportunity to collaborate with the agencies responsible for health, mental health, substance abuse treatment and prevention, and housing – issues that threaten the stability of vulnerable families.

Legal support. As part of the consent decree that ended the Receivership, the Office of Corporation Counsel and CFSA have already more than doubled the number of lawyers representing CFSA's social workers and have committed to a partnership that will enable lawyers and social workers to work much more closely together. The goal is to ensure better outcomes for children, high quality and timely information for the court, and quicker decision-making around children's options for permanency, by making sure that social workers and lawyers are able to prepare together in advance of court hearings and that social workers always have legal representation in court.

Political leadership and support. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of the Mayor's and Council's leadership and the commitments you have made on behalf of the District's children and families. Your actions thus far are strong statements of your commitment, and I will continue to look for your advice and support as we move forward.

The Next Steps – and the Challenges Ahead

WE must move ahead in several priority areas in order to seize this extraordinary moment of opportunity. Over the summer, I have sought to take initial steps in many of these critical areas, while also assessing the needs and strengths of the agency, reaching out to key stakeholders, and experiencing the agency's operations first-hand. Among the key experiences that have helped me identify these priorities are brown-bag lunches with line staff, conversations with a wide range of stakeholders, a Federal monitoring review that included a weeklong on-site look at cases as well as conversations with families and partners, and a case review currently being conducted by the Federal court monitor.

First, to accomplish any of the other goals, we must successfully recruit and retain a sufficient number of well-trained, highly qualified social workers to keep caseloads at an acceptable level. Among the steps I have taken to get started in reaching this goal are:

- I have put in place a recruitment and retention plan, drawing extensively on advice from staff;

- I have visited all of the local universities and colleges with MSW and BSW programs to seek partnerships in recruiting their graduates, and we have already increased the number of student interns in place.
- I have brought in part-time contract staff to assist with critically needed coverage, particularly in the evenings and on weekends.
- We have been able to move right away on concrete supports identified by staff as important to doing their job well and therefore to retention, including sufficient cars to make home visits as well as cell phones for case-carrying social workers.

Second, we must provide timely and high quality investigations of allegations of abuse and neglect in order to ensure children's safety. A key part of our work over the summer in implementing the new legislation regarding unification has been to work with the Metropolitan Police Department to develop policy and protocols for joint investigations and to provide extensive training on abuse investigations for our intake staff. We will need to continue working on both training and policy development, as well as seeking to staff up further in the off-hours shifts to be able to ensure timely response.

Third, we must increase the number of kinship, foster, and adoptive placements that meet the needs of our children, both by recruiting additional foster, adoptive and kinship homes and providing these parents with the supports they need to meet children's physical, mental health, educational, and developmental needs. I have already begun to work with Maryland with the goal of developing a border agreement that will make it easier and less bureaucratic for kinship and foster families to care for a child from the District if that is the appropriate placement. We have also identified resources to assist families in the District with lead paint abatement, a critical issue for families who are able to provide foster care to a young child. In addition, we have published foster home regulations this summer and will be publishing the District's first-ever regulations governing group homes by September 30, and beginning on October 1, we will be licensing and monitoring both foster and group home settings with the goal of supporting high quality services.

Fourth, when children come into our system, we must plan quickly for their future to ensure that they either return home or move to a permanent family if they cannot safely go home. We cannot leave children in the system for

years without a permanent family, and we must fully involve family and community resources to make sure we are doing the best for our children.

Fifth, we must build on the strengths of the existing Healthy Families/Thriving Communities Collaboratives to take the next step in linking CFSA's work to community supports for families. Now that we are part of the District government, we can work with communities and our agency partners to ensure that fragile families receive the early, preventive supports they need, and that families that have already entered the system are linked to supports, formal and informal, that complement what CFSA can provide.

Sixth and finally, to accomplish all of these goals, we must focus on our agency information systems, so that we can make decisions based on information and ensure that children never again fall through the cracks.

CONCLUSION

While these are ambitious goals, I believe that they are the right next steps to make a difference for children and families – to ensure that CFSA lives up to the basic commitments of a child welfare agency to ensure children's safety, enable children to live in permanent, loving families, and promote the wellbeing of the most vulnerable children and families. These are not goals

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that I can accomplish alone, and they are not goals that CFSA can accomplish alone – but with your support, and the support of the whole DC community, we can accomplish them together. Thank you, and I look forward to any questions you may have.